DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 423 962 PS 026 859

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TITLE	If Leadership Was Everyone's Domain. Working Papers.
INSTITUTION	Wheelock Coll., Boston, MA. Center for Career Development in Early Care and Education.
PUB DATE	1997-00-00
NOTE	10p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	Administrator Qualifications; Administrators; Child Caregivers; Credentials; *Day Care; *Early Childhood Education; Leaders; *Leadership; Leadership Qualities; Leadership Responsibility; Leadership Training; Professional Development
IDENTIFIERS	Diversity (Groups)

ABSTRACT

"Taking the Lead: Investing in Early Childhood Leadership for the 21st Century" is an initiative to support quality in early childhood programs by promoting director credentialing and leadership development in the early care and education field. In developing its two initiatives, "Experiments in Director Credentialing" and "Emerging Leaders Experiments," Taking the Lead created a framework to define and examine issues around leadership. Some of the questions contributing to the development of this framework are: (1) What definition of leadership is Taking the Lead using?; (2) Who are the leaders of the early childhood field, who can be leaders, and who should be leaders?; and (3) What competencies/characteristics do effective leaders need? Other issues addressed in the framework are: (1) ambivalence in the early care and education field toward leaders and taking on leadership; and (2) transformation in a field where consensus is slow in coming and disagreement is undesirable. This paper discusses each of these questions and issues, exploring aspects of the leadership dialogue and the transformational leadership that Taking the Lead hopes will be created by its initiatives. Contains 14 references. (EV)

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Working Papers

Taking The Lead
Investing in Early Childhood Leadership for the 21st Century

ED 423 962

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If Leadership Was Everyone's Domain

by
Cecelia Alvarado
Director, *Taking the Lead*

Taking the Lead: Investing in Early Childhood Leadership for the 21st Century is an initiative of the Early Childhood Funders Collaborative, a group of 16 national funders who seek to support quality in early childhood programs by promoting director credentialing and leadership development in the early care and education field. In the summer of 1996, the Collaborative selected The Center for Career Development in Early Care and Education at Wheelock College to manage the initiative.

One of the most interesting and moving activities of this newly formed initiative came at the first meeting of our National Panel of Advisors in March of this year. Each member of this diverse and distinguished panel of early childhood/leadership specialists was asked to briefly describe "one defining moment in their own leadership development."

It was quite instructive to hear these long-time leaders refer back to a time when they were not known, and most were not even aspiring to leadership roles. They spoke of being mentored. They spoke of being called to lead. They spoke of not feeling ready for the responsibility that leadership would bring. Most entered the leadership domain when they were very young, even as children.

One precept of our initiative is that anyone, at any stage of adult professional development, can take on new leadership roles. We suspect, however, that the leadership we are seeking to develop in *Taking the Lead* may best be nurtured in the early stages of experiences in the field, and for many people in early care and education that may be when they are students or entry-level practitioners.

One of the major ways we see *Taking the Lead* contributing to current thinking and practice in the field is to facilitate the identification, training, and support of future leaders from diverse ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and economic backgrounds who are in an early phase of developing their leadership capabilities. Another is to make certain that any efforts toward director credentialing around the country incorporate standards which guard against the exclusion of people of color, language minorities, and low-income practitioners who aspire to or might contribute significantly to transforming the leadership dialogue in ways that are essential if we are to meet the needs of the diversity of families we currently serve.

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Taking the Lead can contribute significantly to quality enhancement of programs by providing opportunities to develop new ways of thinking about leadership development and leader identification, education, development, support, and retention in the field of early childhood care and education. Through looking at programs and initiatives that currently exist inside and outside the field, and by funding two sets of pilot projects – one on director credentialing and one on leadership development – throughout the country that support the goals of the initiative, *Taking the Lead* may forge the keys to opening doors to leadership roles and opportunities to all members of our field.

The "Experiments in Director Credentialing" and "Emerging Leaders Experiments" pilots are planned to begin this fall and winter, respectively. In developing these initiatives, we felt it was necessary to create a framework to define and examine issues around leadership that will arise in the course of our work. Some of the questions we are asked most contributed to the construction of this framework, including:

- "What definition of leadership is *Taking the Lead* using?"
- "Who are the leaders of our field, who can be leaders, and who should be leaders?"
- "What competencies/characteristics do effective leaders need?"

Other issues with which we are struggling as we seek to define and shape *Taking the Lead* are:

- ambivalence in the early care and education field toward leaders and taking on leadership; and
- transformation in a field where consensus is slow in coming and disagreement is undesirable.

In the pages that follow, we explore aspects of the leadership dialogue and the transformational leadership we hope will be birthed through the many varied initiatives within *Taking the Lead*.

- **What definition of leadership is *Taking the Lead* using?**

Traditional definitions of leadership contain these sorts of descriptors: to lead, guide, be in-charge, in-command, influence, conduct, facilitate, or be a dance partner. It is true that at different moments perhaps all of those methods might need to be employed to deal with different situations that might arise for a leader in our field. It might also be true that strategies and qualities that may not be common among today's leaders, or may be unique to different settings, may need to be a part of the repertoire of the leader of the twenty-first century.

In order to figure out what those strategies and qualities might include, it is essential to look at the goals of the leadership we want to develop. Even in non-transitional times, leaders must be expected to move the agenda forward; make progress toward goals;

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inspire others; bring people together as a working team or unified whole; elicit the opinions of underrepresented voices; and sometimes act as the depository/sounding board for people's frustration, anger, and misinformation.

So, how is transformational leadership different from what we have described as traditional leadership? At the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Institute for Professional Development Conference in June 1995, representatives of the Inter-Institutional Early Childhood Collaborative made up of Bank Street College, Erickson Institute, Pacific Oaks College, and Wheelock College spoke to the issue of transformational leadership. Ed Klugman (Jones, 1995) defined it this way:

> "A move to transformational leadership involves a willingness to rethink relationships of power within our settings. It involves a move away from top-down, hierarchical modes of functioning and a move toward shared decision- making, teamwork, and community building...a move toward creating and building institutions and communities of wholeness, equity, and authenticity -- where diversity and the ideals and practices of participatory democracy can be celebrated, demonstrated, critiqued, and developed."

This concept of leadership is at the heart of *Taking the Lead*.

- **Who are the leaders of our field, who can be leaders, and who should be leaders?**

Current Leaders

As a woman of color, when I look at the leadership of our field, for the most part, I see individuals who:

- have unprecedented commitment to the quality of life of children and families;
- are underpaid for the highly complex and important work they do every day and yet receive much greater salaries than the average provider in centers, family child care or school-age care;
- have a philosophy and hold views espoused by the major literature of our field;
- are individuals who have college degrees in child development, education, early childhood education, psychology or related fields;
- have been taught in institutions in this country, most of which use a knowledge base that is Euro-centric in nature, middle class in aspiration, and uses standards based on mainstream experiences;
- have had very little formalized leadership training;
- are white women;

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- have little or no experience living in communities of color or in poverty;
- speak English as their first and usually only language; and
- have little information and/or training regarding systems of institutional oppression and institutional change.

In 1997, there are some real differences between the make-up of the leadership in our field, the practitioners that constitute the bulk of our workforce, and the general face of the clientele we serve. This situation creates for the leadership of our field an extraordinarily difficult task. Many of these leaders have very little educational preparation and few relevant experiences to guide them through the landscape of a rapidly changing ethnic and linguistic population.

And what about those members of underrepresented groups who have been able and willing to attain positions of leadership in our field? Some segments of our field have been more successful than others in recruiting and retaining individuals from these groups, such as Head Start and migrant education. Often I have heard staff in these settings speak about their treatment and influence as not the same as that of their counterparts in the mainstream population. Sometimes people have inferred to them that their assignment was not made out of merit but because of a quota mentality. Other leaders in these settings find themselves feeling a strong sense of isolation and alienation from other leaders in the field because of the lack of involvement, marginalization, and general invisibility when attending gatherings of leaders.

Potential Leaders

It seems logical to conclude that in order to meet the needs of a changing population we need leaders who possess a deep and far-reaching understanding of the circumstances, issues, hopes, and ways of navigating the world of the people they are charged to lead. Who might best have that understanding? Who might best lead a particular population? It is our contention that those who have lived in those same cultural contexts, or those who have worked extensively to understand them, have the greatest potential to provide culturally consistent, authentic leadership – once their leadership skills are nurtured and developed.

One of our most important assumptions is that taking on leadership is something anyone in any role can do. We like to think of leaders as people who make sure things happen the way they should, no matter what their role or circumstance. It may look different and have different kinds of impacts depending on the role or job of the person, but there are opportunities for leadership at all levels and in all roles of our field.

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Leaders might include:

- the family child care provider who organizes other providers to form a provider association to advocate for their needs;
- students who question the "English only" policy of a center in which they are doing field work where the majority of families speak a language other than English;
- the teacher in a school-age care program who regularly attends a board meeting of the recreation center where the program is located to "become known" in preparation for requesting a remodeling of the antiquated playground; or
- the center director who is taking coursework toward her bachelor's degree and requests that next semester one of the courses be offered after 5:30 so that she will not have to take off work to attend.

Another issue in developing leaders from diverse settings has to do with the cultural context within which they are comfortable operating. It is critical to acknowledge that the ways leadership might manifest itself, the way leadership might "look," will be different depending on the priorities, goals, standards, styles, and taboos of any particular group. With these factors guiding and informing their content and processes, leadership development activities will, therefore, necessarily need to change and adapt to different contexts.

- **What competencies/characteristics do effective leaders need?**

Descriptions of essential characteristics of leaders have traditionally included a core knowledge base, commitment, perseverance, advocacy, acting as a role model, articulating well, and being prepared. Leadership has often been portrayed as "being out in front, visible" but can it not also be about listening, following, empowering others and sharing power with others? Should it not be about these things?

And what are the prerequisites for a leader to be in a position to do such things? More than any other responsibility or skill, we believe leaders need most to know their constituency, those they represent and with whom they are allied. Those who are most successful as leaders are one with their community. They come from the ranks of their community. They have lived the day to day existence of a community member. As a result, they understand the variety and complexity of issues and the priorities the community cares about.

Effective leaders of transformational change understand the culture in which these priorities will be implemented and what processes, rituals, and rules need to be followed if the ideas and goals are to be accepted and embraced by wider constituencies. They know what barriers need to be overcome and do not feel daunted by them. They understand institutions and processes of change and the parts power and institutional oppression play in the behavior of group members. An example of this might be the threat of removal of a

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position from a department whose hiring committee has decided not to move ahead with a hiring because there was not an adequate pool of underrepresented candidates. Because of the threat, the members of the committee retreat and agree to move on with the hiring and the result is a loss of the opportunity to diversify the staff.

In the quest to "lead" others through these processes, or to be led by them, must leaders push, question, set expectations, praise? Must they tell the truth? Reveal their own shortcomings? Admit mistakes? Be self-reflective, critical, and analytical of their own behavior? Must they question their own authority and respect their own influence? There are obviously many other qualities that leaders who are working toward transformational efforts would be blessed to hold, not the least of which might be the willingness, even the eagerness to take risks.

- **Ambivalence in the Early Care and Education Field Toward Leaders and Taking on Leadership**

It seems that in the field of early childhood education we often find individuals who are experiencing a difficult time acknowledging the full extent of their leadership influence. Because of our desire to create a collegial atmosphere and to create democratic work environments, leaders often relinquish their influence, decision-making, and voice at times when they are most needed. This hesitancy also leaves the door wide open for only those voices with the most power and influence to be heard. When this happens, our process is heading us away from rather than toward democracy and a sharing of political and ideological power. We hope that one valuable outcome of *Taking the Lead* will be to open a dialogue on this issue of ambivalence around power and influence and how that impacts leadership behavior within the field.

- **Transformation in a field where consensus is slow in coming and disagreement is undesirable.**

Those of us who have been a part of the field for some time would, we think, agree that change within our field is slow in coming. That deliberate pace has both positive and negative results. When consensus is finally reached, we can be sure that the majority of those who stay abreast of policy and standards generally are in agreement. On the other hand, finding mechanisms for change toward more rapid solutions is problematic.

Another reoccurring barrier to moving through new ideas toward new solutions is the fact that disagreement—even debate—is avoided because of the discomfort people in our field experience when they must oppose the view of another. This last issue is perhaps one of the first that needs to be addressed if diversity, change, and risk are goals of transformational leadership.

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It is my hope that in thinking about the ideas we have submitted here for your consideration, you will try to imagine a profession where:

- the leadership is evident among people in all roles in the field;
- individuals in all roles vary in ethnicity, race, and language; and
- healthy debate about who we are and who we want to become as a profession will become common in an atmosphere of "cariño" (genuine caring) and respect for our different ways of being.

This article is intended to provoke thinking and discussion about leadership in the field of early care and education. We urge you to consider the questions we are posing in this piece and respond to our thinking. Study, ponder, and debate each and every of the elements we have mentioned, and identify those we have yet to propose. Please write down your comments and ideas, send them to us, and share them with others. Exercise your leadership. Your thoughtful contributions will inform this very important work and will bring us closer to the vision we all have—of a field working more effectively than ever before on behalf of the quality of life for all children and families.

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